

Taking off

The world's largest parrot has proved a conservation challenge. **Hannah Robertson** reports.

Conservationists working with the world's largest parrot species in New Zealand are at last beginning to sense some success. There is no precipice quite like that on which these parrots, kakapo, have found themselves for the past 35 years. They are flightless, nocturnal, endlessly curious, exquisitely soft, and critically endangered. Males weigh up to four kilograms and can reach 60 centimeters in length; females are about two thirds the size of males. They have moss-green upper parts and yellow-green underparts. Unlike other parrots, they are solitary, meeting only to mate, which they do only every two to six years, and they lay between one and four eggs each breeding season. This makes them not only one of the rarest but also one of the slowest breeding birds in the world.

By the late nineteenth century it was clear they were in trouble and the first, unsuccessful, attempts were made to rescue them by Richard Henry, appointed as caretaker of a nature reserve established on Resolution Island in 1894. More than 200 kakapo were moved to the island over six years, but they were all killed when stoat swam across from the mainland. Large, flightless, and with a strong sweet smell, kakapo are easy prey.

In 1977 a population of between one and two hundred kakapo was discovered on Stewart Island but it was not until 1980 that the first female was identified and there was, at last, a glimmer of hope. But then the Stewart Island population began to plummet as cats moved in. Over a ten-year period, all 61 remaining kakapo were relocated to four islands that had been made predator free; in 1989 the kakapo recovery plan was introduced and the Kakapo Recovery Group formed. In 2001 there were still only 61 kakapo. Though a few chicks had hatched along the way, many did not survive and some adults had died. The non-interventionist approach to rescue practised up to then did not appear to be working. Desperate measures were called for and taken.

The controversial hypothesis first put forth by Richard Henry in the late eighteenth century that kakapo only mate when the pink pine and rimu trees fruit abundantly was at last being accepted more than one hundred years later, and dietary supplements were developed to substitute for these fruits and assist females in reaching breeding condition. This led to an immediate increase in egg laying, but many of the young failed to survive so nest monitoring was instigated. When a female leaves the nest to forage, volunteers are notified by an infrared sensor and a thermal blanket is placed over the eggs to keep them warm, then removed before the mother returns. Each nest is monitored by a camera: a female was seen breaking an egg scratching fleas and now all eggs are dusted with flea powder. An artificial insemination protocol was developed. Every effort is being made to ensure that Richard Henry, the sole surviving Fiordland male, fathers as many chicks as possible to increase the genetic

diversity. His colouring and call are quite different from the Stewart Island birds, suggesting a distinct background. Things began to look up when, in 2002, 67 eggs were laid and 22 chicks hatched, bringing the population to 84. This was followed by panic in 2004 when three birds fell victim to erysipelas, an acute bacterial infection leading to multiple organ failure. Antibiotics and immunisation prevented any further deaths.

This year has been another bumper breeding year for kakapo. Sixty-three eggs were laid and a total of about thirty chicks are expected. Twenty have hatched so far, bringing the total world population to 111.

This is great relief to members of the Kakapo Recovery Group, some of whom have been working for 30 years to save the species about which the great British naturalist Gerald Durrell once said: "If naturalists go to heaven (about which there is some considerable ecclesiastical doubt), I hope that I will be furnished with a troop of kakapo to amuse me in the evening instead of television."



Difficult: The strange life of the kakapo has tested conservationists trying to help build stocks of this rare bird but this season has seen success. (Photo: NHPA/Photoshot.)